APPETIZER: ALLYSHIP and TRANSITIONS

INSTRUCTIONS
Begin by reflecting on the following three questions.

What comes to mind when you think of the word “ally”? Can you think of a time when you stood up for someone else, or someone else stood up for you? What are some of your hopes and fears about this month’s presidential transition? Once you’ve had a moment to reflect, share your thoughts around the table with the other guests.

ENTREE: WISDOM and CHOICES for A NEW TIME

FRAMING
Even as it marks the start of a new era for the United States, Inauguration Day can also mark the start of a new chapter for each of us; each of us can choose this moment to deepen our engagement with our communities and to recommit to values like justice, fairness, and equity. The following texts present moments of transition and change and offer framing that links them to standing up for others, acting in solidarity with vulnerable people, and serving as an ally.

INSTRUCTIONS
Find a chevruta (a partner) and select from the texts below to explore the idea of leadership and transition. Discuss the guiding questions and share any takeaways with the larger group.
A NOTE ABOUT CHEVRUTA LEARNING

Chevruta literally means “friendship” or “companionship.” It is the traditional rabbinic approach to Talmudic study in which a pair of students analyze, discuss, and debate a shared text. Unlike a teacher-student relationship, partnered learning puts each student in the position of analyzing the text, organizing their thoughts into logical arguments, explaining their reasoning to their partner, hearing out their partner’s reasoning, and sharpening each other’s ideas, often arriving at new insights into the meaning of the text. Spend some time wondering out loud together before referring to the guiding questions. Allow space for each partner to have the opportunity to share a response.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What are the skills and talents we want in our leaders, whether of our country or of the movements and organizations we’re involved with?

2. What are the things you hope for your community and the United States as we start this new era? What are the things you hope for yourself?

3. God’s grant of long life isn’t without strings. God conditions the gift, requiring Solomon to follow God’s instructions more broadly. In thinking about your hopes for the country and yourself, what are you willing to do, or in some cases, give up, in order to achieve them?

TEXT ONE: 1 KINGS 3:5-14

(1985 JEWISH PUBLICATION SOCIETY TRANSLATION)

Soon after becoming the King of Israel, Solomon is offered a choice of what he wants as he begins his reign. Here is his response:

At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, “Ask, what shall I grant you?” Solomon said, “You dealt most graciously with Your servant my father David, because he walked before You in faithfulness and righteousness and in integrity of heart. You have continued this great kindness to him by giving him a son to occupy his throne, as is now the case. Your servant finds himself in the midst of the people You have chosen, a people too numerous to be numbered or counted. Grant, then, Your servant an understanding mind to judge Your people, to distinguish between good and bad; for who can judge this vast people of Yours?” The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. And God said to him, “Because you asked for this—you did not ask for long life, you did not ask for riches, you did not ask for the life of your enemies, but you asked for discernment in dispensing justice—I now do as you have spoken. I grant you a wise and discerning mind; there has never been anyone like you before, nor will anyone like you arise again. And I also grant you what you did not ask for—both riches and glory all your life—the like of which no king has ever had. And I will further grant you long life, if you will walk in My ways and observe My laws and commandments, as did your father David.
GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. This story has its basis in the new king of Egypt not knowing the past benefits that Joseph and the Hebrews had provided to Egypt. How do you keep track of the kindnesses others have done for you individually, even if they’re people you didn’t know personally?

2. According to this story in the Bible, the Egyptian midwives serving as allies is a key act in saving Hebrew lives and the existence of the Jewish people. What are ways, big and small, you act as an ally to people at greater risk than yourself?

3. As we being a new era in the United States, many people with vulnerable identities, including undocumented immigrants, People of Color, LGBT folks, and Muslims, are feeling particularly fearful and at risk. For those of us who hold those identities, what are we looking or asking for in our allies? For those of us who are less vulnerable, what does it mean to serve as an ally, and what are we willing to contribute to others?

TEXT TWO: EXODUS 1:8-10, 15-21

At the start of the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the Torah tells of a change in Egyptian leadership and the consequences for the Hebrews living there. The new king was unfamiliar with previous Hebrews’ contributions to Egyptian well-being, particularly the actions of Joseph in saving Egypt from starvation, and institutes new decrees based on his perception of the Israelites as a potential threat. In response, some Egyptians step up to serve as allies to the Hebrews.

A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.”

The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, saying, “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.” The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?” The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.” And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.
Each day we go about our business, walking past each other, catching each other’s eyes or not, about to speak or speaking. All about us is noise. All about us is noise and bramble, thorn and din, each one of our ancestors on our tongues. Someone is stitching up a hem, darning a hole in a uniform, patching a tire, repairing the things in need of repair. Someone is trying to make music somewhere, with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum, with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice. A woman and her son wait for the bus. A farmer considers the changing sky. A teacher says, Take out your pencils. Begin. We encounter each other in words, words spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed, words to consider, reconsider. We cross dirt roads and highways that mark the will of someone and then others, who said I need to see what’s on the other side. I know there’s something better down the road. We need to find a place where we are safe. We walk into that which we cannot yet see. Say it plain: that many have died for this day. Sing the names of the dead who brought us here, who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges, picked the cotton and the lettuce, built brick by brick the glittering edifices they would then keep clean and work inside of. Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day. Praise song for every hand-lettered sign, the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables. Some live by love thy neighbor as thyself, others by first do no harm or take no more than you need. What if the mightiest word is love? Love beyond marital, filial, national, love that casts a widening pool of light, love with no need to pre-empt grievance. In today’s sharp sparkle, this winter air, any thing can be made, any sentence begun. On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp, praise song for walking forward in that light.

1 This poem was composed for and presented at the first inauguration of President Barrack Obama in January 2009. Its author, Elizabeth Alexander, is an African-American poet and author currently on faculty at Yale University. Source: poets.org
DESSERT: NO ONE is GETTING LEFT BEHIND

FRAMING

Pursuing racial justice is a process. How we approach it will evolve as we explore our identities and histories and as we change through our experiences. But Jewish tradition and the sources we have read tonight push us to take the initiative in beginning that process.

INSTRUCTIONS

Take a look at the Next Steps document and choose one or more actions that you will follow through on. Then, choose one person at the dinner to be your accountability partner and exchange contact information. Set a time in the next month to follow up with each other.

Take time to reflect on this experience and process the information presented in your discussion. Go around the table, having everyone read one line of the following quote from Edward Everett Hale, an American author and Unitarian minister:

I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything; but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

With Hale’s benediction of responsibility ringing in the air, take a moment to think about what it means to do the something that you can do in the fight for racial justice.